PERFORMING THE RUIN: SOME QUESTIONS OF MATERIALITY AND DRAMATURGY

SIMON MURRAY, 11 DECEMBER 2019.

Firstly, a word of context and background. For about 5 years I've been immersed – at times quite unhealthily I suspect – in research and fieldwork for a book entitled ***PERFORMING RUINS*** which I submitted to my publisher only a week ago. In what follows I shall extract some reflections, doubts, questions, and examples of practice from this process which I hope will resonate with our preoccupations over the next two days. During these 5 years I have given several papers and co-written a couple of essays – one of which was with Hayden Lorimer whom you will be hearing from tomorrow morning – and looking back over the titles of these writings I see that most of them employ the word 'thinking', the word 'question' or the act of questioning in relation to the material ruin. Hence 'The Ruin in Question' with Hayden, 'Thinking like a ruin' with my colleague, Carl Lavery, and a solo effort, 'Questions to ask the material and immaterial ruin'. This regular return to the act of questioning reveals – certainly in retrospect – a disposition to approach ruins with a degree of uncertainty and doubt about what any particular ruin is and what 'job of work' it is doing in its ever moving, possibly disintegrating, possibly regenerating state. In his magisterial biography of Samuel Beckett, James

Knowlson talks of the 'radical uncertainty' in so much of Beckett's writing and theatre making. Within the field of Theatre Studies Beckett is the master of ruin through character, mood, atmosphere and landscape – in terms of the latter, think of *Waiting for Godot, Endgame* and *Happy Days*. The force fields behind his embrace of ruination lie – partly – in his experience of working for the Irish Red Cross in the utterly destroyed Normandy town of St-Lo in 1944 – 'The Capital of Ruins' Beckett called it. Of course, Beckett never writes directly or explicitly about human and material ruins but – to borrow Heiner Muller's phrase - his time in St-Lo provides 'the pressure of experience' which quietly underpins and shadows so much of his work. I've felt that holding on to this idea of 'radical uncertainty' has been very productive in all my ruinous encounters and in trying to grasp – if only fleetingly – what they do, how they work, what they enable or afford, and where they might be going. This lens of 'radical uncertainty' offers a number of ways of seeing the ruin, and two of these stand out for me:

- Firstly, the desirability of harnessing a number of often complementary, but sometimes jarring, frames or perspectives to begin to respond to the kind of questions we might wish to pose to the ruin.
- Secondly, never to approach a ruin as if it was a fixed, passive and static object, but rather a configuration of qualities – material and immaterial

> – which have agency, some kind of ability to act back on those who clamber around their broken features, to be stubborn, to be generous, to be difficult, to be secretive and to offer multiple opportunities for imagination, invention, thought and action.

I've sometimes been asked, and often reflected myself, why I had become preoccupied by ruins and why I had been rash enough to propose a book which explored the connective tissues between live performance and ruined sites and locations. It was clearly something to do with the age I find myself occupying. I will spare you most of these gloomy reflections, but simply quote theatre maker, Mike Pearson, when reflecting on a re-enactment in 2014 of a performance – 'The Lesson of Anatomy – about Antonin Artaud which he had first presented 40 years earlier in 1974. Pearson in 2015 writes that he was 'Showing the patinas and consequences of ageing in a body written over and through, etched upon, by experiences artistic and quotidian'.

From the perspective of a theatre maker I had become aware that theatre and performance had come very late to ruins in comparison with other art forms. Think of classical painting, modern war painting, romantic poetry and literature and – in the C20th – film and, above all, photography. Theatre and performance had to set itself free from the spatial and dramaturgical constraints of the proscenium arch and the black box studio in order to begin

embracing a host of other non-theatre spaces as potentially generative sites for performance. Engaging with ruined locations was but a small step to follow after escaping the proscenium arch. However, my deep background as a Sociologist and a Cultural Studies person obliged me to push further beyond the internal drivers of theatre making and to consider the wider forces at stake in trying to understand why ruination and decay had become compelling force fields in our current difficult and dark times. In a dialogue I performed with Carl Lavery at a conference in Athens two years ago I suggested that Raymond Williams' elegant term 'structure of feeling' might help us to position the rise of Ruin Studies and wider, less academic, preoccupations with ruination over the last two decades. Williams uses a phrase to hint at what he means by structure of feeling: 'Social experiences in solution' (Ibid, 133) and a form of thinking which challenges the separation of the social from the personal. That area of tension between 'ideology' and 'experience'. Cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, reformulating both Gramscian notions of hegemony and Williams' structure of feeling', might have put it something like this: 'what is the "present conjuncture" that drives us to become acutely sensitised to ruin and ruination'? In a conversation with political activist and cultural geographer, Doreen Massey, Hall says:

> It's partly about periodization. A conjuncture is a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape.
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> (Hall & Massey 2010, 57)

I think 'the present conjuncture' not only offers up ruination as a productive lens to examine the material, political and social world, it also obliges us, in a way that has perhaps never been the case in other epochs, to engage with the territories of ecology and environmental catastrophe. In addition, I would suggest that other features of this 'structure of feeling', this 'present conjuncture', might include:

- The ubiquity and urgency with which we are confronted by images of ruin through global communications and social media.
- A reconfiguring of the emotional drivers of melancholy and loss as generative, and not simply sentimental states of nostalgia through which to investigate ruination. In this I am much influenced by the writing and thought of WG Sebald.
- The turn to what Jane Bennett calls 'vibrant matter' (Bennett 2010) or a political ecology of things.

- The rise and rise of the ‘Heritage Industry’ and - at best – a radical revisioning of policies towards ruins and ruination.

- An embrace of the fragment, the broken and failure as a trope for understanding the world and, more particularly, as a driver for art practices. Here, perhaps, we can see a curious postmodern flirtation with the dominant tropes of Romanticism.

To return to my own recent writing. I ended up ruining the agreed structure of my book within a year of signing the contract with my series editors and the publisher. Not a strategy I would recommend to every author. What was to have been a review and summary of how ruins figure in extant drama, dance and live art with a few case studies of performative events in ruined or abandoned spaces became a more all-embracing account of my travels around Europe, visiting ruined sites and – more importantly – talking to artists, theatre makers, directors, curators and producers about the work they had made in derelict spaces. Finding out about their intentions, their dramaturgical objectives and, above, all the kind of relationship(s) they wanted between the art work and the site in question.

So much for context and framing. Let me now turn to some of my discoveries. In the opening of the book I described my method as ‘situated’ and ethnographic. Of course, it was never purely and narrowly these but after

the events of my fieldwork, these terms perhaps come closest to my approach. There was also considerable desk based research. I should say that from the outset my focus was largely on modern ruins – the ruins of modernity perhaps – although I do have two chapters on the ruins of Greek antiquary and the role they have played down the centuries in helping to forge the Greek imaginary. I found myself becoming particularly interested in how Greek classical ruins have always played – and continue to play – a critical, often ideological, role in how Greece understands itself and how we understand and position Greece. This, however, is a discourse for another time.

My focus was on the ruins of warfare, of the Cold War, of political turbulence and on the industrial ruins of Capitalism. In addition, I spent time experiencing the earthquake generated ruins in Sicily's Belice Valley. Over a period of three years I visited Mostar and Sarajevo in Bosnia Herzegovina, Gibellina and Palermo in Sicily, Athens, Elefsina and Thessaloniki in Greece, the Ruhr Valley and Berlin in Germany and Gdansk, Wroclaw (VROTS-laav) and Legnica in Poland. In the UK my focal points were South Wales, Glasgow Govan and St Peter's Seminary at Cardross on the mouth of the Clyde.

Mike Pearson, founder and artistic director of Welsh theatre company, Brith Gof, encapsulates the various pieces his company performed in abandoned and derelict industrial buildings in the 80's and 90's as 'occupations'. These

works were undertaken with permission from the particular authority concerned, but many of the cultural projects I investigated were 'illegal' occupations in the more transgressive sense of protest, dissent and activism. Typologies of occupation have proved useful to me as I've tried to understand the different relationships which artists and performance makers have had with ruined sites.

In Athens and Berlin the artists I talked to who had occupied disused buildings in different stages of dilapidation seemed to be driven by motives of pragmatism and political protest – and often these dispositions were mutually complementary. In the abandoned and decaying department store of Kunsthaus Tacheles in Berlin the driving force was a kind of exuberant post 1989 confidence in claiming disused spaces where artists could make work in a mutually supportive and alternative context. At its height, Kunsthaus Tacheles, contained numerous artist's studios and workshops, a café, whisky bar, nightclub and a cinema; its stairwells and walls layered with graffiti. Behind the main building a large courtyard served as a social area during clement weather and as a quasi-exhibition space for sculptures built from rubble, old machinery, vehicles and other objects. Throughout its history Tacheles produced or hosted many live performances embracing dance, live art, cabaret and experimental theatre. I interviewed performance maker, Paolo Podrescu for whom Tacheles

and other ruined Berlin sites were ‘liberated zones’ which afforded, not only the flourishing of a variety of creative and other performance practices, but also perform as prefigurative forms for living differently in relations of mutuality, sustained kindness and support. I sensed that for Paolo the ruined or derelict site was not only materially attractive to him, but also that ruin and ruination in itself possessed a kind of psychic and cultural force field to see and experience the world differently. His dismay at the final ruining of Tacheles in 2012-14, and the concomitant gentrification of Berlin, was due not to nostalgic sentimentality or some kind of attraction for an aestheticised ruin porn, but signalled an ending, the termination of those ‘liberated zones’ which in their ruination offered space for difference, creativity and an empathetic mutuality. Greek artist activists such as Gigi Argyropoulou, one of the leaders of Mavili Collective’s occupation of the Embros theatre and Green Park Café in Athens between 2012 and 2014 expressed very similar sentiments. Here, the propelling force was protest at the calamitous austerity imposed on Greece by the EU and how the severity of these measures particularly hit artists. In the Embros Theatre and Green Park these occupations became laboratories for articulating and imagining different modes of protest and dissent through performance and collective living.

In Berlin I also went to **Teufelsberg** – or the Devil's Mountain as it is called - perhaps the most startling site I encountered in the course of my travels around Europe. Teufelsberg performs the ruin as palimpsest par excellence although I don't always find this vertical layering of a ruin the most productive way to frame the present and history of any particular site. The Devil's Mountain is perhaps a triple or even quadruple ruin. At 120 metres high the Devil's Mountain was constructed from the rubble of a ruined Berlin pulverised by Allied bombing between 1942 and 1945 and lies within the Grunewald forest west of the city. Another perverse curiosity about the Teufelsberg 'mountain' is that deep within it, at its base, lies the unfinished Military Technical College designed by Hitler's architect, Albert Speer. Such was the robust nature of this steel, stone and concrete structure that it successfully resisted demolition before the City's rubble piled up around it. Instead, its demise arrived by suffocation or drowning as millions of tons of dust and debris buried the building that was to have trained Hitler's elite military for the next 1000 years. Teufelsberg was born from the Herculean labour of 1000's of defeated German citizens, largely women. At the top we find a third level of ruination namely the decaying buildings and geodesic radomes of what was once the National Security Agency's Field Station Berlin. Within this startling and unnerving collection of buildings, with hardly a space left free of graffiti

art, we can also discover the half-built, but abandoned remains of property developers' failed attempts over the last two decades to translate this dereliction into highly profitable real estate. A fourth layer of ruination. In 1963 on the ruins of Berlin the Berlin Field Station was built to see and hear across the frontiers of the Cold War. From the post war settlement, Teufelsberg had become part of the British sector of Berlin, but it was the US listening station that was to be built atop the *Devil's Mountain*. From this vantage point, British and American personnel monitored the electronic emissions from the Stasi and the military forces below as well as significant and high level political intelligence from as far away as Moscow. When the Soviet Empire collapsed in 1989 and the Wall came down, Field Station Berlin immediately lost its function and was rapidly abandoned. The whole site is hugely theatrical and for about 15 years has been occupied by a collective of artists and hosted a range of performance events. The mystery and complex rich history of the place only partly explains its attraction to artists and performance makers. As with similar sites of occupation, Teufelsberg's appeal lies as much in the availability of unregulated and low cost 'studio' space: the economics of cultural production trumping – or at least competing with - aesthetic and atmospheric allure. Moreover, like Tacheles, the Embros Theatre and Green Park projects when they existed, the promise and practice of

'community' – a shared, if temporary commons – was also a strong enabling driver and force field. I was shown around by artist and journalist Richard Rabensaat who, in August 2016, directed and dramaturged a live art event with performer, Biljana Bosnjakovic. The piece, entitled *PURGE,* explored the concept and experience of purgatory through Biljana's embodied and raw engagement with different parts of this ruined and sometimes dangerous site. Plants, overgrown shrubbery, shattered concrete, mangled and rusty steel take on a live and animated quality as she moved amongst the buildings, culminating in her immersion in a filthy and hazardous 'lagoon' left open to the elements after the collapse of one of the building projects - sometimes up to her chest, sometimes lying on her back, hair matted with sludge and muck. Richard and I spent some time staring into this hellish lido. Teufelsberg has also engaged the imagination of UK sound artist, Louse K. Wilson, who, as part of her practice has spent time in many Cold War abandoned military ruins and at Teufelsberg in particular. During her time at Teufelsberg Wilson performed and recorded a number of sound pieces, most recently at the top of one of the derelict radomes.

Time does not allow me talk about Brith Gof's performance of *Gododin* in the empty Rover engine factory in Cardiff or that Company's theatre work in a deserted farmhouse of West Wales; of Alberto Burri's astonishing piece of land

art, Il Cretto, which literally covers the Sicilian town of old Gibellina destroyed by an earthquake in 1968, of Ludovico Corrao – the communist mayor of Nuova Gibellina and his messianic and utopian project of building a new Gibellina driven by the redemptive power of art and theatre; of artist and performer interventions in the Gdansk shipyard and within the still ethnically unstable semi ruins of Mostar; of the War Theatres in Sarajevo under siege; of Duisburg-Nord's Landschaftspark now an environmental experiment on the site of what was once one of the largest iron and steel works in Europe; and of NVA's heroic attempts to find new life for the extraordinary high modernist ruins of St Peter's Seminary in Cardross near Glasgow.

The performance and theatrical projects I identify and reflect upon within the book represent a diverse range of activities and manifold relationships with the ruined environments which they occupy. These portraits are singular in their particular and detailed practices, but, also, reveal some patterns and commonalities. In almost all these cases the performance events which have taken place in these locations have a nuanced relationship with both the materially ruined environment and its immaterial history. My fieldwork and research confirm Fiona Wilkie's own admission that her categories of performance in non-conventional theatre spaces – site-specific, site-generic and site-sympathetic – are porous and certainly not discrete. Almost all of my

case studies lie between site-specific and site-sympathetic, and err towards the latter. Many of these cultural 'occupations' have afforded a prompt or trigger for performative "laboratory" experiments across the fields of performance, ecology, archaeology and history. For many of these projects the very act of occupying a ruined or abandoned space is a statement in its own right, regardless of the nature of the performance executed therein.

Behind or beside both the political propulsion of protest and dissent and the form and dramaturgies of works performed, there remains for many of these protagonists, on the one hand, the elusive and mysterious fascination for ruined spaces, and on the other the pragmatism of needing to occupy abandoned low or no cost spaces for work, social or domestic purposes. For Mike Pearson the pull of a dilapidated, soon to be demolished industrial space is rooted in his sensibility as a performance maker. In conversation he commented

> I do wonder if the attraction is that their state of dereliction or abandonment almost meets a kind of work which is trying to assemble itself within that occupancy and the hope that those two things meet in the middle, come together.

Through a different lens, Athens based theatre director, Simos Kakalis told me that his decision to stage *Apokopos* in the old oil mill at Elefsina was due to his

sense that this abandoned place spoke resonantly to the dream performed in Bergadhis' original poem. For Simos the long dead oil mill was a place of ghosts, of rituals engaging with the dead and the dying and he believed that the memories generated by the meeting point of poem and material space would well serve his dramaturgical mission. In Berlin, activist and performance maker of three decades, Paolo Podrescu spoke of ruined sites as being 'liberated zones' but these, I sensed were much more than practical workspace solutions for impoverished artists. These places seem to have had a particular charge which offered ways of living, not determined by the cash and commodity nexus, but by relations of mutuality, exchange, support and creativity. In this sense, and in many nuanced and complex ways, I have an inkling that Paolo might be speaking for all multiple occupations of ruined spaces I was fortunate enough to encounter over the last 5 years.